Miranda
Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone / Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

13 | 2016
Thomas Spence and his Legacy: Bicentennial Perspectives

Introduction

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/9030
DOI: 10.4000/miranda.9030
ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher
Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference
Rachel Rogers and Alexandra Sippel, "Introduction ", *Miranda* [Online], 13 | 2016, Online since 23 November 2016, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/9030 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.9030

Introduction

Rachel Rogers and Alexandra Sippel

1 In 2014, the bicentenary year of the death of Newcastle-born radical Thomas Spence, there were a small but significant number of acknowledgements to the life and times of the relatively little-known writer, propagandist, coin-maker and bookseller. The collection of essays edited by Alastair Bonnett and Keith Armstrong *Thomas Spence : The Poor Man's Revolutionary* came out, bringing together the work of specialists of Spence from across the academic community.[1] The conference, "Bicentennial Perspectives on Thomas Spence : Radical Reformer in the Age of Revolution", organised at the university of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès in November 2014, was another contribution to this ongoing exploration of the radical's life and work two hundred years after his death. It sought to introduce a French university audience to the work of scholars studying Spence's manifold political and linguistic plans and their contemporary echoes.[2] This edition of *Miranda* therefore brings together the papers presented at the conference and other ongoing work on Spence and his legacy.

2 Thomas Spence is much less well-known than fellow radicals such as Thomas Paine or Mary Wollstonecraft. He was born into a poor, Dissenting family in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1750 and his strongly Calvinist upbringing influenced his ideas and later career. His experience of poverty led him to develop a twofold reform program at age 25, which, he claimed, provided solutions to the only two fields that science had not yet improved : language and land ownership. His phonetic alphabet and his Land Plan were the two sides of the same coin that was to erase the penalising distinctions of social class. He remained in Newcastle until the early 1790s, eking out a living in various trades while also becoming involved with the Newcastle Philosophical Society and beginning his activity as a writer and propagandist. In 1792 Spence moved to the capital where he entered metropolitan radical circles, including the London Corresponding Society. He was at various times targeted under the government's measures to subdue reformist activity in the wake of the French Revolution. Trying his hand at different trades, he made a meagre living through peddling ballads, making token coinage and selling tracts, handbills and pamphlets. He nevertheless remained in relative poverty all his life. He lent his name to a utopian system of social regeneration – which he dubbed Spensonia – but also to reforming societies and a radical 'Spencean'

underground which lasted through to the 1840s. He died in 1814, relatively unknown in the historical landscape. Yet the discovery of a 1775 essay by Spence in 2007, the foundation of a Thomas Spence Society and the creation of a permanent memorial to Spence in Newcastle in 2010 attest to the revival of interest in this relatively little-known figure of the radical tradition.[3]

3 Spence anchored his Land Plan in the biblical festival of the Jubilee when the people of Israel were supposed to each go back to their original possessions[4], which he interpreted as an end to the accumulation of private property. From this he concluded in his *Rights of Man* that God was a notorious Leveller. The succession of poor harvests led several writers and radical reformers of the 1790s to draw up various land plans. While Non-Conformist Spence drew his inspiration from the Old Testament, in France François Noël Babeuf dreamt of emulating the Gracchi, two brothers who were successively elected to the Roman Senate and who both became tribunes in the second century BC. Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus was the first one to defy his fellow tribunes' authority as he attempted to pass the Lex Sempronia that meant to take the *ager publicus* – the commons of the day – away from the aristocracy and return it to the citizens who originally had a right to till it in exchange for a minimal contribution. The lands had been appropriated without any legal basis by a class that considered it was their legitimate compensation for having supported the war effort in the previous decades. They cultivated it on a large scale and with slave labour, which further asphyxiated the small landowners who tried to make a living from their work on their estates. Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus became immensely popular among these citizens who had suffered the loss of the *ager publicus*. His not-quite-legal efforts to have his law implemented angered the other eight tribunes who saw him as a would-be tyrant and who organised his murder in 133 BC. Nine years later, his younger brother Caius Sempronius Gracchus went down the very same path, gaining popular support and becoming a tribune before passing political and agrarian laws that admitted some plebeians into the circles of power and that enabled people's assemblies to set wheat – and therefore bread – prices. Just as unpopular among his fellow tribunes as his elder brother had been, Caius Gracchus died in 121 BC, together with several thousands of his supporters[5]. In 1794 France, 'Gracchus' Babeuf took up the double dimension of the ancient brothers' laws and proposed several plans for reform that included a fair distribution of land and a genuine democratisation of French politics and society. In this regard, he was much more radical than either Tiberius or Caius Gracchus who had only focused their attention on Roman citizens rather than on the population at large. Babeuf on the other hand, much like Spence and other revolutionary radicals – though by no means all of them – considered for example that women should be admitted to clubs or to the electorate.

4 The articles that follow address three main topics that animated Spence's thought. Malcolm Chase and Rémy Duthille offer new perspectives on Spence's ideas on human rights. Myriam-Isabelle Ducrocq, Jean-Yves Tizot and Matilde Cazzola then provide insights into Spence's Land Plan in a historical perspective. Finally, Edmund Downey and Joan Beal shed light on Spence's literary connections and linguistic ambitions.

5 Malcolm Chase contributes a revisionist paper that posits Spence as far more influential on later radical movements than had been assumed until the 1980s. He argues that it was Spence's agrarianism, not Paine's, that served as the intellectual bedrock of Chartism. His Land Plan, based as it was on small holding, was meant to

check the authority – or authoritarianism – of central government and lay the necessary foundation for comprehensive economic and political reform. Though Paine believed that poverty did not exist in the state of nature, he also thought there was no going back from the civilised state. To Spence, on the other hand, setting limits on land accumulation and returning to the use of the spade were two means of erasing the inequalities generated by civilisation.

6 Just as Spence had condemned the appropriation of vast estates to the detriment of the poorer classes, his supporters followed in his footsteps in the mid-nineteenth century when they opposed reforms likely to turn the land into a commercial good that could make affluent bourgeois classes yet more affluent. The new rules of post-industrial revolution Britain would not change the situation of agricultural tenants, just the social class of those exploiting them. Land reform was at the core of the Chartists' plans, whether they consisted in the nationalisation of land or in the confiscation of harvests for the benefit of paupers, the unemployed and poor labourers who were entitled to it as to a "national rent". Just like Spence, the Chartists therefore considered that all other human rights stemmed from having a stake in land property.

7 A contentious aspect of studies of Thomas Spence is his views on women. Rémy Duthille makes an important contribution to this debate. Duthille takes issue with David Worrall's conclusions that Spence was an anti-progressive feminist who adhered to a broadly patriarchal agenda and did not go far enough in outlining a coherent agenda of women's rights. For Duthille, Spence's thinking on such topics was an integral part of his philosophy and went much further than many of his contemporaries. Duthille traces the development of Spence's thought from his initial musings on the subject in *The Rights of Infants*, where he posits women as the champions of natural rights, through to his later work on constitution-making, suggesting that the radical's views embrace women's rights more comprehensively in his later work. He advises against relying solely on the more well-known tract for Spence's definitive views on women and seeks to "vindicate Spence's record on women's rights". In doing so, Duthille introduces his reader to the wealth of writing on Spence's attitudes to women, including the work of Malcolm Chase, Jon Mee and Ariane Chernock.

8 Duthille suggests that Spence was writing for a male and female audience, unlike some of his fellow pamphleteers of the late 18th century, some of whom held relatively misogynistic views, despite their republican affinities. Spence took pains to sketch a portrait of a "politically-conscious, vocal and respectable lower-class woman, who stands up for her and her family's right", a portrait that was particularly evident in his later work. Duthille locates this sympathy for working women and denunciation of the treatment of single mothers and their children when they claimed relief in Spence's own impoverished upbringing in Newcastle. Most notably, Spence defended women's rights in *The Constitution of a Perfect Commonwealth* (1798) and *The Constitution of Spensonia* (1803) where he specifically advocated female suffrage and adopts a gender-neutral vocabulary. Nevertheless, Spence fell short of demanding full equality and retained doubts about women's capacity for political office. Duthille concludes by highlighting how inappropriate and anachronistic it is to judge Spence's critique of patriarchy and his defence of women's rights by contemporary standards, arguing that he was one of the most progressive radicals of his time.

9 Myriam-Isabelle Ducrocq opens the second part of this volume which is dedicated to the debates over land ownership. Her paper sheds light on the Leveller and Digger

movements of the 17th century and how they inspired 18th-century radicals. The Putney Debates especially provided several options regarding private property and civil rights. While some judged that there was no other constitution than property, others argued that granting the vote to a larger part of the (male) population would contribute to shaking off the Norman yoke. Two years later, the Diggers' experiment was deeply rooted in the Bible : the land had been bequeathed by God to all men as a common treasury and enclosures were incompatible with this original gift to all mankind.

10 In 1656 James Harrington argued that male primogeniture should be abolished when it came to the succession of large estates as it permitted large concentrations of property that were compatible with a monarchy, but certainly not with a commonwealth as was then the case. Though it fell short of doing away with private property altogether, it was a first step towards limiting the size of estates – a concern that was central to Spence's thought in the next century. Institutions too would be reformed, along lines derived from the heyday of the Athenian and Roman republics in order to prevent corruption. Though Spence drew on the Leveller and Digger legacy, he was much more suspicious of a strong central government than Harrington had been in 1656 ; but his plan for the democratisation of institutions and limitation of the size of landed estates definitely echoed the previous century.

11 In the first decades of the 20th century, Ebenezer Howard witnessed the creation of the first garden cities based on his 1898 treatise *Tomorrow a Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Jean-Yves Tizot shows how, among the many utopian sources from which he drew inspiration (with Edward Bellamy or Robert Owen), Howard singled out some details from Spence's Land Plan. It had already been taken up by early socialists, including Karl Marx himself who considered Spence as one of the first utopian socialists. Local collective land ownership and the payment of its dividends was, to Spence, a way of generously providing parishioners with enough resources to live on, as well as sound public services catering to their intellectual needs. The poor were to be relieved from a mere hand-to-mouth existence and to lead a rewarding life balancing industry and leisure.

12 Though Howard specialists have tended in the past to focus on his town planning reforms, they now see them as the outer sign of a more elaborate economic and social plan. Though he borrowed some of his localism from Spence, Howard foresaw a capitalist venture based on private property and profit. Tizot emphasises how Howard edited Spence's 1775 Newcastle lecture, leaving out critical references to the landowning classes or to democratic reform, in order to promote his own capitalist agenda instead. To a certain extent, such a plan might be considered as foreshadowing David Cameron's 2010 "Big Society" as delineated in the Conservative electoral manifesto. It entailed a greater amount of local involvement which relied on the voluntary participation of all inhabitants in the administration of various public services like libraries. Localism seems to be a recurring trope of British politics, whether advocated by (proto-)socialist reformers or by more conservative ones.

13 Matilde Cazzola brings out another aspect of the debate over land ownership and democracy. Her paper analyses modernity as the era when private property and capitalism emerged with the process of enclosures and free trade in landed estates. She sheds light on two different interpretations of the commons as they have come back to the fore in recent decades. On the one hand, some, like Ugo Mattei or Peter Linebaugh insist on natural production of the commons, whereas Negri and Hardt highlight how

human labour produces common value. Both these analyses however attempt to go beyond the public/private rhetoric.

14 Cazzola argues that, two centuries and a half ago, Spence had already bridged the gap between the public and the private and between the commons as shared natural products and human production. This brings her to a study of today's reflections on a universal basic income.[6] All in all, Matilde Cazzola offers a very detailed analysis of Spence's understanding of the commons and of the universal revenue they should provide to all parishioners, as a legitimate source of income rather than as alms or poor relief for which they should have been grateful.

15 Another strand of enquiry pursued in this collection is the different literary and philosophical networks that Spence was involved in, some of which were unexpected, such as Spence's connections with the conservative chapbook author, Hannah More. Edmund Downey studies the connections between Thomas Spence and three other figures from the period, Daniel Isaac Eaton, More, and the little-known printer Ralph Beilby, bringing to the fore the impact of Spence's work after the revolutionary period and among both radical and loyalist campaigners. Downey charts the links between Spence and radical publisher Eaton, both of whom began political miscellany magazines with a radical content in late 1793. Spence's *Pig's Meat* came out in August 1793, while Eaton's *Politics for the People* appeared the following September. He suggests that the links between the two periodicals were noticed at the time of publication, leading some contemporary observers to claim that the two authors were pursuing a joint venture. Downey notes the similarities in content, title, style and visual design, as well as in the cost of the publications, which were aimed at a popular readership. He also brings to light the close personal and working relationship cultivated by the authors, most notably through their links with the London Corresponding Society.

16 Downey also suggests links between Spence and Hannah More, focusing in particular on their joint working relationship with the Newcastle printer and engraver Ralph Beilby. As Downey notes, such evidence points to the fact that radical and loyalist circles could be interconnected, both targeting popular audiences, using similar 'democratic' dialogue forms and exploring visual media, albeit with differing ends and at differing stages in their writing careers. Downey contends that More and Spence, despite the clear divergences in their aims and message, showed "a similar engagement with and production of popular political literature. Both authors sought to influence labouring class readers by appropriating plebeian literary cultures to further their divergent political ideologies", demonstrating the overlap between radical and conservative cultures. This reinforces some of the conclusions drawn by Mark Philp in his work on the popular loyalist movement. Philp has argued that one of the unintended consequences of the reactionary Association movement was the political education of its lower-class activists.[7]

17 Spence studies tend to bring together specialists from across disciplines, highlighted by the work of Joan Beal in this collection. In France, there is much renewed interest in how the English language was spoken in the 18th century, one notable example being the research conducted by Nicolas Trapateau at the University of Poitiers.[8] Beal's article shows how Spence's plans for spelling reform were inextricably linked to his political designs, in that his work on language was only one strand of a broader aim of providing the labouring population with the tools to educate themselves. Beal shows how until recently scholars have concentrated on Spence's political views to the

detriment of his views on language, seeing much less of a consistent interest in spelling reform than the evidence provided by Beal confirms. Spence himself, as Beal articulates, saw both as equally important to his radical vision of society.

18 Beal puts Spence's work on spelling reform into the wider context of the eighteenth century, when there was considerable momentum for a standardised version of English, in particular after the Acts of Union of 1707, and when the publication of English grammars and pronunciation guides abounded. Spence's *Grand Repository of the English Language* was not well-received by contemporaries and Beal suggests that even those who supported Spence's political ideas "saw no merit in his plan for spelling reform". She argues that the ostensible reasons (its difficulty, and the influence of Spence's northern accent) masked more fundamental objections to his work ; in other words, that it was in the service of his "ERRONEOUS and dangerous levelling principles", and therefore too radical even for fellow members of reforming circles, such as the London Corresponding Society, of which Spence was a member.

NOTES

1. The book included contributions by established scholars of Spence including Keith Armstrong, Joan Beal, Alastair Bonnett, Malcolm Chase, Michael T. David, Gregory Claeys, Rachel Hammersley, John Marangos, Jon Mee and Robert W. Rix. It was published by Breviary Stuff Publications.

2. For further studies of Spence see Joan Beal, *English Pronunciation in the Eighteenth Century: Thomas Spence's Grand Repository of the English Language* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism, 1775-1840* (1988; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), Marcus Wood, *Radical Satire and Print Culture, 1790-1822* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) and John Barrell, "Radicalism, Visual Culture, and Spectacle in the 1790s," *Erudit: Romanticism on the Net* 46 (2007).

3. See Malcolm Chase in the introduction to the 2010 edition of *The People's Farm*.

4. Leviticus XV:13

5. For a French readership, more information on the Tiberius and Caius Gracchus can be found in C. Bouix. La Véritable histoire des Gracques. Paris : Les Belles Lettres, 2012 or in C. Nicolet. Les Gracques. Crise agraire et révolution à Rome. Paris : Gallimard, 2014.

6. Readers interested in this specific issue and in its radical 18th-century roots can read "Two Arguments for Basic Income: Thomas Paine (1737-1809) and Thomas Spence (1750-1814) by J.E. King and John Marangos. History of Economic Ideas, XIV, 2006, 1.

7. Mark Philp, "Vulgar Conservatism, 1792-3" in *English Historical Review* 110.435 (1995): 42-69. Philp suggests that, in engaging the working population with popular loyalism, the Association movement, whose aims went counter to those of the radical reform movement, inadvertently encouraged the very political participation and education its campaign was seeking to avoid.

8. See Nicolas Trapateau, *Placement de l'accent et voyelles inaccentuées dans la prononciation de l'anglais du XIIIe siècle sur la base du témoignage des dictionnaires de prononciation, des vers et de la musique vocale*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Poitiers 2015.

INDEX

Keywords: Radical, radicalism, phonetic alphabet, Land Plan, London Corresponding Society, French Revolution, utopia, Jubilee, private property, Levellers, Diggers, commons, agrarianism, Chartism, small holding, nationalisation, women's rights, natural right, republicanism, female suffrage, civil rights, Norman yoke, Athenian and Roman republics, (utopian) socialism, town planning, localism, "Big Society", public/private debate, modernity, universal revenue, poor relief, literary and philosophical networks, radical publishers, periodicals, popular political literature, political education, spoken English, spelling reform, standardised version of English

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